

WHAT WAS THIS MESSAGE OF "MOST PRECIOUS" GOOD NEWS?

By Paul Penno Jr.

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The word "gospel" means "good news," "glad tidings" (Acts 13:32). There is explosive power in "the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation" (Ephesians 1:13, TEV).

Can that apostolic message be recovered in its purity? Here is a *precis* of the unusual message proclaimed in the 1893 meetings. Many today believe it deserves a revived interest:

(1) *God's forgiveness is more than a legal acquittal.* Justification by faith works the miracle of reconciling an alienated person to God, making him obedient to His law.

In contrast, the usual idea is that justification by faith is only a legal declaration, pronounced in one's favor if or when one does the right thing—"accepts Christ." God does nothing for us until we do something first.

The message caught the joyful New Testament news that God has already done something great for everybody. At the cross of Christ He has *legally* justified the whole world. As "all the world [has] become guilty before God" and as "all have sinned, even so all are "being justified *freely* by His grace" (Romans 3:19-24). "Through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to *all men*, resulting in justification of life" (5:18). "God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Christ "is

the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the *whole world*" (1 John 2:2). He is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world!*" (John 1:29).

This has to be so, said our *Signs* editors a century ago, otherwise no human being could stay alive for even a moment. Sin automatically brings the sentence of death immediately, but the Lamb of God already took that sentence upon Himself "from the foundation of the world" so that "He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (Revelation 13:8; Hebrews 2:9). "If One died for all, then all died," that is, if He had not died, all would be dead (2 Corinthians 5:14).

The Lord's Supper thus becomes more than an esoteric sacrament for the elect; it teaches the whole world a vital lesson. No one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food but he is nourished by the body and blood of that Lamb of God. The cross of Christ is stamped on every loaf of bread. This is something one either believes or disbelieves; one can't sit on the fence. And simply believing it works tremendous changes in the heart and practical life.

In other words, "every one" is already infinitely and eternally in debt to Christ, whether or not he knows it and whether or not he believes it. The world in its sinful madness would have committed suicide long ago if the Son of God had not already taken its suicidal penalty upon Himself. He was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). "In Him we live and move and have our being" even though we may not know it or confess it (Acts 17:28).

But the fact that Christ has legally justified everyone does not mean that everyone will automatically be saved, because many exercise their freedom of choice to despise and reject what He has already done for them, and thus destroy themselves. Inspired by Romans 5:18, E. J. Waggoner wrote:

As the condemnation came upon all, so the justification comes upon all. Christ has tasted death for every man. He has given Himself for all. Nay, he has given himself to every man. The free gift has come upon all. The fact that it is a free gift is evidence that there is no exception. If it came upon only those who have some special qualification, then it would not be a free gift. It is a fact, therefore, plainly stated in the Bible, that the gift of righteousness and life in Christ has come to every man on earth. There is not the slightest reason why every man that has ever lived should not be saved unto eternal life, except that they would not have it. So many spurn the gift offered so freely.¹

When one hears the Good News of the cross and one's worldly heart responds with appreciation, then the miracle of *justification by faith* takes place, and the heart is changed. Faith is not a cold intellectual assent to doctrine, nor a self-centered fire-escape flight from hell. "With the heart one believes to righteousness" (Romans 10:10). Fear is not heart-believing. Genuine justification by faith is a heart experience that radically changes the life because

hope of reward and fear of hell are transcended by an appreciation of Christ's great sacrifice to redeem us. This is how faith immediately produces in the life true heart-obedience to all the commandments of God.

How can this be? What is the process by which such a marvelous change take place?

(2) *It is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that reconciles us to God. Thus the cross is more than a legal maneuver of punishment for a broken law.* It is the revelation of the righteous love of God in Christ, "set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith" (Romans 3:21, 25). The Father is not "propitiated," for He already "so loved" us that He gave His Son; Satan can not be "propitiated," for he hates us still. Who then is left to be "propitiated"? It is we, of course. It is *our* hearts that are reconciled by the cross. And no one can be truly reconciled to God and not at the same time be reconciled to His holy law, the transcript of His unselfish character.

Legalism has distorted the gospel so badly that many have not seen the dimensions of the cross. According to John 3:16, God does the *loving*; He does the *giving*; and our part is the *believing*. Genuine faith therefore is to appreciate His loving and His giving.

No one can change his worldly, selfish heart, but what does change it is this "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). We are not saved by works, nor are we saved by faith *and* by works; we are saved by "faith *which works*" (KJV). The believer is not a stronger person made of sterner stuff than other people. What makes the difference is faith. It

¹ *Signs of the Times*, March 12, 1896.

is not good people who are saved, but sinful people who believe.

The believing comes by beholding the cross. This is what is meant by “receiving the atonement,” a making-at-one-with-God (see Romans 5:11). Isaac Watts understood what faith is and how it “works by love”:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Paul had the same idea when he said, “God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). Our 1888 *Signs* editor said:

Crucified with Christ means the utter giving up of self, acknowledging that we are nothing, and trusting absolutely in Christ. In Him we rest. In Him we find Sabbath. . . . The cross means death, but it also means the entrance into life. There is healing in Christ’s wounds, blessing in the curse that He bore, life in the death that He suffered. Who dare say that he trusts Christ for everlasting life if he dare not trust Him for a few years or months or days of life in this world?²

(3) The Gospel is such Good News that it says it is actually easier to be saved than it is to be lost, if one sees that cross. How the Gospel has often been twisted out of shape! When Jesus clearly

² *The Glad Tidings*, p. 141.

says, “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light,” religious people like to think that His yoke is hard and His burden heavy, that God is trying to keep us out of heaven.

When Saul was on his way to persecute the church at Antioch, Jesus told him that the way to be lost is “hard for you” (cf. Matthew 11:30; Acts 26:14). Note the explosive power for a changed life in this message of grace: “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life” (Romans 5:20, 21). Our young *Signs* editors caught the astounding idea:

When grace reigns, it is easier to do right than it is to do wrong. . . . Grace reigns against sin, and beats back all the power of sin. So it is as literally true that under the reign of grace it is easier to do right than to do wrong, as it is true that under the reign of sin it is easier to do wrong than to do right.³

But grace is not simply more powerful than is sin. . . . There is much more power in grace than there is sin. . . . Let no one ever attempt to serve God with anything but the present, living power of God, that makes him a new creature; with nothing but the much more abundant grace that condemns sin in the flesh. . . . Then it will be found that his yoke is indeed “easy” and his burden “light”; then his service will be found indeed to be with “joy unpeaseable and full of glory.”⁴

³ A. T. Jones, *Review and Herald*, July 25, 1899.

⁴ *Ibid.*, September 1, 1896.

(4) *Genuine righteousness by faith imparts a new and effective motivation for serving the Lord.* The usual motives are: (a) the desire for the reward of eternal life in heaven; (b) the fear of being lost in hell; (c) the desire for personal benefits here and now.

Such motives are certainly not evil, but they are powerless to produce wholehearted devotion. A temptation so alluring that it over-rides our hope of reward in heaven can throw us, or a fearsome terror could over-ride our horror of hell. (This will be the final test of the mark of the beast of Revelation 13). A bird in the hand will then appear better than two in the bush.

All of these motivations have a common denominator. They are self-centered, and the best that they can do is a paralysis of spiritual lukewarmness. There is a futile sense of “I-ought-to-be-more faithful,” or “I-ought-to-overcome-my-faults,” or “I-must-study-my-Bible-more,” or “I-must-pray-more,” or “I-must-witness-more.” All such motivation based on self-centered hope of reward, fear of hell, or personal insecurity is what Paul meant by his phrase, to be “under the law” (Romans 6:14).

The 1888 message presented a better motivation: being “under grace.” One is still “under” something, but has exchanged a compulsive devotion to self for a compulsive devotion to Christ. *This is true freedom.* Waggoner revels in it:

In this freedom there is no trace of bondage. . . It is liberty of soul, liberty of thought, as well as liberty of action. It is not that we are simply given

the ability to keep the law, but we are given the mind that finds delight in doing it. It is not that we comply with the law because we see no other way of escape from punishment; that would be galling bondage. . . . The promise of God when accepted puts the mind of the Spirit into us so that we find the highest pleasure in obedience to all the precepts of God’s Word. The soul is as free as a bird soaring above the mountaintops. It is the glorious liberty of the children of God. . . . It is the liberty of those who do not have to be watched but who can be trusted anywhere, since their every step is but the movement of God’s holy law. Why be content with slavery when such limitless freedom is yours? The prison doors are open; walk out into God’s freedom.⁵

(5) *There is Good News that the Lord will have a people who are prepared to welcome Him at His second coming.* Christ is not taking an extended vacation, indifferent to the needs of His world. When He was rejected and crucified, He was exiled from this world, but He wants to return again to right its wrongs and take to Himself His faithful friends.

In the meantime, all the dead of all past ages are prisoners of hope. Like Luther, the 1888 *Signs* editors recognized that the saved do not go to their eternal reward at death, but wait until the resurrection. What we call “death” Jesus calls a “sleep.” Those “who sleep in Jesus” must remain in their graves until He returns, for only He is the Prince of life who can call them forth. If this is not

⁵ *The Glad Tidings*, p. 104.

true, the second coming of Christ cannot be “the blessed hope,” for there is no need of His returning if the saved go to heaven at death.

But He cannot return until “the harvest of the earth is ripe” (Revelation 14:14, 15; Mark 4:26-29). There cannot be a resurrection of the dead until Jesus returns, and He cannot return until He has a people ready, or “ripe,” for His return. In that light, therefore, character-perfection suddenly becomes very important. The honor and vindication of Christ are involved in it. Waggoner said:

The cleansing of the sanctuary—a work which is set forth in the Scriptures as immediately preceding the coming of the Lord—is coincident with complete cleansing of the people of God on this earth, and preparing them for translation when the Lord comes. . . . The life [character] of Jesus is to be perfectly reproduced in His followers, not for a day merely, but for all time and for eternity.⁶

Since the prevalent view of justification by faith is that of a mere judicial declaration of pardon, a forensic decree which leaves sin deeply entrenched in human nature, it becomes impossible for anyone to be truly Christlike in character. Such a view says that sin *per se* cannot truly be overcome.

But the 1888 *Signs* editors saw that this popular view actually justifies Satan’s rebellion against God. It concedes that the rebel’s charge is true that fallen, sinful man cannot render true obedience to the law of God. That would mean that Satan is right

and Christ is wrong! And as long as one who professes to believe in Christ thinks that sin is invincible, he or she can not have strength to resist temptation.

This is the secret of the terrible spiritual weaknesses of many who profess to be Christians. The world sees that Christians can be little if any better than many unbelievers. The 1888 message sees justification by faith as *forensic-effective*, thus bringing honor to Christ in effectively delivering His people from sin. If the message had been developed it could well have become a bridge between Calvinism and Arminianism, supplying the deficiency in each.

(6) *Christ is a “Saviour nigh at hand, and not afar off.”* Our *Signs* editors presented the New Testament view that Christ took our fallen sinful nature in His incarnation, yet did not participate in our sin. He conquered sin, not in a sinless nature, but in our sinful nature. It was in fallen sinful flesh that sin had taken up its residence, and He had to meet and solve the problem where it was.

Our 1888 editors were deeply impressed by the clear Scripture teaching of this truth: “What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Romans 8:3, 4).

Where was the problem of sin? In human flesh [nature]. What did God do about this problem? He sent His Son in the “likeness” of that same flesh. What did Jesus accomplish there? He condemned

⁶ *The Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 365, 367.

or defeated sin in our nature. Why did He win this great victory? That those who have faith in Him might live in true obedience to His law.

Our Saviour must not evade the battle that we have. But the dogma of the “immaculate conception” requires that His mother, Mary, must herself be conceived “immaculate,” so that she can have virtually holy flesh, free from our sinful inheritance. Thus Christ is cut off from our genetic inheritance, and automatically is excused from experiencing our conflict with sin. The inevitable conclusion which follows logically is that sin *per se* is invincible.

The *Signs* editors saw this extra-biblical view to be a denial of His having truly come “in the flesh” and thus a sign of Antichrist (1 John 4:1-3). The “immaculate conception” view implicitly supports Satan’s basic charge that he has invented something that even God cannot conquer—sin in fallen human flesh. And if Satan is right, he must eventually win his war with God.

In contrast, our editors of 1888 saw Christ revealed in Hebrews 2 as “one” with His “brethren.” “As the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same. . . . In all things He had to be made like His brethren. . . . In that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (11, 14-18). He is “nigh at hand, and not afar off,” a phrase used in 1889 to encapsulate their message? Perfectly sinless Himself, He can save the most sinful.

This was not cold theology but practical help for people who battle with evil. Only when we realize

that we “have a High Priest [who] was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” can we know how to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”⁷ (4:15, 16). Such a High Priest is our true Psychiatrist, the physician of our souls.

Here is the Saviour that our modern world of AIDS, VD, hatred, violence, selfishness, and materialism, desperately needs! He has built a bridge that reaches all the way from the throne of God to where we are. He reaches down His long arm that He might lift us out of our swamp of sin.

(7) *The 1888 Signs message forged a link between the New Testament truth of justification by faith and the cosmic Day of Atonement in which we are living today.* Daniel’s great prophecy of chapter 8 discloses the great cosmic battle between Christ and Satan. Sin is a rebellion that has invaded God’s government of love and justice, creating a civil war infinitely greater than our own War Between the States. Satan is leading a strike against God in which the stakes are total success or total failure.

Daniel declared that the antitypical Day of Atonement would begin at the end of 2300 years, when the heavenly sanctuary, nerve-center of God’s controversy with Satan, should be “cleansed,” that is, vindicated (Daniel 8:14). That time prophecy ended in 1844. The human race is now living in the most momentous period of world history, preparing for the soon return of Christ.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, March 5, 1889.

Since Christ, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world, He must demonstrate His power to save humans from sin, not in sin. As humanity's great High Priest, He is performing that final work in a unique sense, cleansing roots of sin and alienation that have their roots even from childhood. A people is being prepared for the coming of the Lord. They are not super-people, just ordinary people of every nation, race, and level of society who are responding to the Good News revelation of His love. This grand work is accomplished by His ministry of justification by faith—making straight what has been crooked.

In our natural state, we find it hard to believe that salvation is actually by faith alone. The battle we have to fight is called “the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). The only difficult thing we have to do is to learn to *believe*. When the Jews asked Jesus, “What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?” He replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe . . .” (John 6:29, 30).

Salvation does not depend on our holding on to God's hand; it depends on our *believing* that He is holding on to our hand. One's faith makes one to become an important link in God's great chain let down to save a perishing world.